ARUBA TODAY

ISLAND INSIGHT

Article by Etnia Nativa
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SHIMARUCU (Malpighia emarginata)

Episode CCCVIII-308

The narrative presented by Etnia Nativa—meaning "Native Ethnicity"—emphasizes the importance of reclaiming the island's cultural identity and heritage, often overshadowed by colonial history. Through this platform the organization promotes the rediscovery of native traditions and identity, encouraging a shift away from colonial legacies toward cultural self-empowerment.

In this episode, we're raising awareness about a wonder plant—the Aruban wild cherry, locally known as shimarucu (Malpighia emarginata). Commercially, this fruit is also known as acerola, Barbados cherry, or West Indian cherry. It grows as a small tropical shrub or tree and is packed with fascinating nutritional and medicinal qualities.

The wild cherry plant is native to Central America and is also found in northern South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. On Aruba, shimarucu is a familiar sight, especially along the island's trails. After the rain, these trees are often full of ripe fruit, easily spotted on the roadsides. The fruit's taste is quite distinct from the sweet cherries found in supermarkets—it's tart, refreshing, and widely appreciated by locals not only for its flavor but also for its health benefits. Traditionally, it's used as a natural remedy to help fight off colds, prevent the flu, or simply enjoy as a seasonal treat.

Though small, the shimarucu cherry delivers a powerful nutritional punch, especially as a rich source of vitamin C, which plays a key role in supporting the immune system.

In general, cherries are known for their health benefits. Research shows they are high in antioxidants, potassium, and other essential nutrients that may help reduce the risk of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Shimarucu is no exception. In fact, its vitamin C content is exceptionally high—up to 30–50 times that of oranges.

In addition to vitamin C, shimarucu contains polyphenols, anthocyanins, and carotenoids, all of which help fight oxidative stress, slow down aging, and potentially reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Some studies also indicate mild anti-inflammatory properties, which could support the management of conditions like arthritis.

Because vitamin C is essential for collagen production, acerola (shimarucu) is also popular in cosmetic and skincare products. Moreover, preliminary lab studies suggest its antioxidant properties may contribute to cancer-fighting effects. While human research is still ongoing, the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) recognizes cherries—including our shimarucu—as a food that may help fight cancer. One key detail: the deeper red the cherry, the more acidic and antioxidant-rich it is—so don't be afraid to make a sour face, because these fruits are seriously good for you!

Eating or drinking shimarucu can help you meet your daily vitamin C needs, making it especially useful during the cold and flu season, which on our island coincides with the rainy months—also when shimarucu is most abundant.

As for its other reported benefits—like aiding digestion, enhancing mood, boosting athletic performance, and easing diarrhea—recent studies are beginning to back up many of these traditional uses with scientific evidence.

Shimarucu can be enjoyed in many ways: in juices and smoothies, jams and syrups, as dietary supplements (in powdered or extract form), or in traditional medicine (through infusions or eaten fresh).❑

If you enjoyed reading our ancestral stories and want to explore the true identity of the Aruban people, we invite you to visit Etnia Nativa—the only "living museum" of its kind in the Caribbean. Founded in 1994, Etnia Nativa has been a cultural pioneer, co-founding key institutions such as Islands National Park, the Archaeological Museum of Aruba, and several artisan foundations, among other voluntary initiatives.
Etnia Nativa offers a one-of-a-kind experience that connects visitors with the spirit and soul of the island's ancient heritage.

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